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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Ambassador Ramtane Lamamra**
Chairman, Group of 77
Permanent Representative of Algeria to the United Nations

JOURNALISTS: Paul Lewis, The New York Times
Bhaskar Menon, Times of India

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

GROUP OF 77

AMBASSADOR RAMTANE LAMAMRA, Permanent Representative of Algeria to the United Nations and the current Chairman of the Group of 77, reviews the achievements of the Group since its establishment in the 1960s. It represents a wide segment of the world population as well as a large number of United Nations Member States. The Group speaks with a common voice on many international issues, functioning as an effective negotiating block and maintaining solidarity among developing countries. Ambassador Lamamra hopes to see the Group, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, participating in preparations for upcoming international conferences and summits as well as continuing its work towards reactivating the North-South dialogue and revitalizing South-South cooperation.

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Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to in troduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

During the decolonization period of the 1950s and 60s, a number of newly independent third world countries decided they needed their own organization, which is now known as the Group of 77. Commemorating its 30th anniversary this year, it promotes the economic and social interests of its members. Over the years, the Group has grown to include 131 countries. What role has the Group played in international affairs, and what will be the future of this organization in the post cold war era?

Our guest today is the current Chairman of the Group of 77. He's Ambassador Ramtane Lamamra, the Permanent Representative of Algeria to the United Nations. Joining me to speak with Ambassador Lamamra are Paul Lewis of *The New York Times* and Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India*. Ambassador Lamamra, welcome to World Chronicle.

LAMAMRA: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Ambassador, who is the genius who thought up the idea of the Group of 77, 30 years ago? Was there one dominant figure who was responsible for it?

LAMAMRA: I would think that the merit is a collective one. You will remember that in 1955, when the Afro-Asian group was established in Bandung --

LITTLEJOHNS: Indonesia.

LAMAMRA: -- Indonesia -- the meeting did not discuss only political matters and decolonization matters. It is not well known, but the meeting did have as its agenda some economic matters. And therefore the very beginning for the G-77 group was at the Bandung meeting. Later on, we did have some brilliant personalities, economists and politicians from other regions such as the Latin American region, and here the name that comes to mind is the name of Mr. Raul Prebisch.

LITTLEJOHNS: Of Argentina.

LAMAMRA: Of Argentina, who has played a significant role in terms of input to the platform of action of what became later on, in '64 formally, the G-77.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have you more or less reached saturation point in terms of membership now? You started with I believe 75, although you called yourselves the Group of 77. And you've gone up to 131. Are you going to 150 before you're through?

LAMAMRA: Well, I don't think that we'll reach 150, but we still think that some more members from developing countries could join. I am thinking, in particular, about

Eritrea, that has recently joined the United Nations. So probably Eritrea will become a formal member of our Group. Just for the historical aspect of it, in '63, before the formal inception of the Group, we had 75 countries, including New Zealand, but it was not at that time formally G-77. When G-77 was formally established on the 15th of June, '64, New Zealand did withdraw, and we got two more members, and that is why at the very beginning it was established by 77 countries, and therefore it carries this --

LITTLEJOHNS: New Zealand withdrew because it considered that it was not a developing country, was that the reason?

LAMAMRA: I would think so, yes.

MENON: At the moment, do you have full membership of all regions, Latin America for instance? Are all Latin American countries members of the 77?

LAMAMRA: Most of them. Very few are not. Very few are not, but --

LEWIS: So what have you accomplished exactly? Because it seems to me that the goals that you've set yourself are the things like the New International Economic Order. That was a whole series of commodity cartels based on OPEC, and that has collapsed, it never happened. So what have you done?

LAMAMRA: Well, Paul, I would think that G-77 represents really a success story in terms of cohesion, in terms of gathering together the strands of 130 nations we have mentioned, plus China, I would like to mention. We do represent today the wide majority of mankind in terms of population, and also the widest majority of the UN members in terms of UN membership. And for such a group to remain a flexible group, not to be served by any secretariat, permanent secretariat, and yet to exist, to function properly, to coordinate the views of so many Member States, and to be an effective negotiating force in various international fora, this is for me a major success.

MENON: But in the wake of the post-cold war period, there's a general impression that the Group of 77 has lost a great deal of its energy. Is this true?

LAMAMRA: I would think that various sequences of the history of our Group are marked by adaptation and improvement. We have always stood for adaptation and improvement, and that is precisely where lies the flexibility of the Group, which is at the basis of its efficiency. Of course in the '70s, as Paul was mentioning, we had some major conceptual breakthroughs such as the New International Economic Order ideas, the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, but we have not seen the results of those conceptual breakthroughs on the ground.

LEWIS: No, you certainly haven't. It seems to me that G-77 is a total failure. You haven't done anything. You tried to have commodity cartels, you failed. You set

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up UNCTAD, it's never done anything. You tried to have generalized debt relief, and that has failed. So what have you done?

LAMAMRA: Well, what we have done, we have always been, as I said, the most accomplished expression of solidarity among developing countries. Probably, if you look at it otherwise, if there was no G-77 the situation would have been worse. As for the cartels, I think that a certain number of developing countries have decided to work together within certain cartels. This has no direct link with G-77 as such --

LEWIS: Look at OPEC. The real price of oil is lower today than it was in 1973, at the time of the first oil price hike.

LAMAMRA: That is correct.

LEWIS: It's an absolute failure.

LAMAMRA: Well, for understandable reasons, OPEC is not any more very influential in determining the oil prices, but that does not mean that that has not been the case in the past. International circumstances have changed, and that is why I'm mentioning and focusing on the two main ideas of adaptation and improvement. We do our best to improve ourselves, we adapt ourselves to the changing circumstances, and I believe that, even today, the industrialized world needs G-77 as much as our Group needs the G-77.

MENON: Ambassador, quite a number -- a few of your members, in fact, have graduated from the ranks of developing countries. They're in fact now recognized by economists as the newly industrialized. Does this strengthen the Group or weaken it?

LAMAMRA: I think it strengthens the Group. We don't have criteria according to which we should decide that such a country, because of the level of development it has reached, should not anymore belong to our Group. Indeed, by the differentiation in the level of development of various members of the Group, we do have various perceptions. But our success precisely lies in the fact that, even with such diversity, we reach consensus and we speak one voice in the major international arena.

LEWIS: So can you tell us if the members of G-77 have any common economic interests that are shared by all of them? Because it seems to me that their interests are very, very divergent.

LAMAMRA: No, we have common interests in reforming international relations. Our common interest is to stand for all developing countries to have their fair share in the world economy. Our interest lies also in the very fact that, although some specific problems face subgroups, let us say, within the Group, there is still wide consensus of everybody to extend solidarity to these groups. For instance, we do have in a few days a Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

These are something like 40, 45 members of the Group. But still it is the whole Group that acts on their behalf and that does everything to promote the interests of this group.

MENON: On social issues, the main focus has always been on economic issues within the 77. But on social issues, what for instance has been the G-77 role in the whole evolution of the human rights question in the way that international organizations have dealt with that question?

LAMAMRA: Well, we know that there is an International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, and it is one of our precious tools in talking with our partners in the North. We stand for the right to development, and we think that, through the angle of human rights, we have so many arguments to develop with our partners. We have played a constructive and active role at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, and you will find in the documents a clear affirmation of the right for Development. We have also played a major role in all areas discussing migrations, discussing health, discussing education. As you know, we have groups functioning in Geneva working within WHO and others.

MENON: For instance, in the preparations for the Social Summit, one of the key elements that's missing from all the documentation for the conference is any mention of religion. Now, religion, as we know in the developing world, is in fact a critical shaping factor in our politics, in our economics. Why is this a silent item on the agenda?

LAMAMRA: Well, we don't necessarily talk about elements which are specific to groups or individual States within our own Group. It is the case with the prepcom on population, there are so many ways to look at some ethical issues that are at hand that we did prefer as G-77 not to evolve any common position on those specific issues, while on the remaining issues, as population affects development, we do have stands.

But on the Social Summit, I can assure you that at the last prepcom we were really a driving force, and the document that was put forward by our Group will be duly considered by the secretariat as one of the basic documents in the preparation of --

MENON: But religion, on the specific point of religion, religion has emerged as perhaps the single -- so I'm not talking of individual countries now -- internationally what divides. It has been used on the one hand as an instrument of manipulation internationally, and on the other hand, within countries, it is an important factor.

LAMAMRA: It is.

MENON: And yet the Social Summit is completely silent on it at the preparatory process.

LAMAMRA: Well, I don't know what will be the views of my Group on this issue, because the Chairman expresses the consensus that emerges from the discussions. But it's never too late. You know that the Social Summit -- there is a third prepcom session that will take place in New York, next August. So if --

LITTLEJOHNS: Preparatory committee of the --.

LAMAMRA: Preparatory committee of the Social Summit, the World Summit on Social Development.

LEWIS: This is an example of what I've been saying, that you can't agree on religion because in fact your interests are so different that you cannot make -- you cannot agree on meaningful stands, on meaningful positions.

LAMAMRA: No --

LEWIS: That have real substance to them.

LAMAMRA: I would think --

LEWIS: You include very successful Asian countries, terribly unsuccessful African countries, island States and halfway Latin American countries.

LAMAMRA: We still agree on many things. And if you look at our documentation, at the role that we play in all the international fora, you will discover that we speak with one voice on very important issues. We do agree on that, on the relief of external debt. We do agree on the need for additional resources to be invested in development. We do agree that South-South cooperation is important, and therefore that the "wealthiest", quote-unquote, among developing countries should demonstrate their solidarity with their --

LEWIS: But how successful have you been in getting your way on these issues?

LAMAMRA: I think we have -- we have made some steps, and we look forward to new achievements in the same direction.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Ambassador Ramtane Lamamra, Chairman of the Group of 77. Ambassador, what is the relationship of the Group of 77 to the Non-Aligned Movement?

LAMAMRA: I think we are two brotherly groups. Most of the members of Non-Aligned Movement are also members of the G-77. But the G-77 is wider. We do have some 20 countries that are not members of the Non-Aligned Movement. As far as our common work is concerned, we have some kind of informal division of labour. We do work together. The Non-Aligned Movement does promote certain positions and stands on economic and social matters. The Non-Aligned Movement meets at the highest level, that is to say at the level of heads of state and governments. So whatever position emerges from those meetings has the benefit of its endorsement at the highest

level. Then, when it comes to the actual discussion, promotion and negotiation of those very ideas, it is the work of G-77.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned that China is a member of the Group of 77. China is surely a rather strange bedfellow for a group which is made up primarily of much smaller countries.

LAMAMRA: Oh no, China is most welcome as let's say an associate member of the Group. China is more than an observer, but it is not a full member. It is not a full member. But China does take an active part in our discussions, and that is why the chairman most of the time would say that he would be speaking on behalf of the Group plus China, which is the explanation of that.

MENON: One of the continuing problems that the G-77 have faced over the years is a lack of an ongoing, strong central secretariat. A number of your members want a strong secretariat, a number of others do not. Is there any hope that in your 30th anniversary year you will have some conclusion on this important issue?

LAMAMRA: We have established a core group of assistants to the chairman at the level of New York, the United Nations, based on voluntary contributions on the part of Member States. That is to say some missions do accept to offer some of their members to work with the chairman to prepare our documents that are discussed and then enriched by all the membership. We do try our best to strengthen our coordination with the brotherly groups functioning in Nairobi, Vienna, Rome, Paris, Geneva through at least one meeting of coordination each year. The next one will take place soon here in New York precisely in preparation for the 30th anniversary. We do have some ideas on how to promote, to reach the betterment of our organization, but I am not sure that the idea of establishing a permanent secretariat will be the best. It involves money, it involves contributions, and our members are not very eager to embark into new expenses. So the flexible formula that exists currently can be improved without going up to that stage of --

LITTLEJOHNS: So you don't have a formal secretariat.

LAMAMRA: We don't. We have a few collaborators working in the office of the chairman here in New York, and we have a network of contacts with all the chapters, what we call chapters, other multilateral places.

LITTLEJOHNS: How did you become the chairman, sir? Were you elected, or is it an alphabetical thing, or is it --

LAMAMRA: No, it's an election. There is a rotation amongst the regions that belong to G-77. So this year it was up to the African region to offer a chairman. And the Algerian candidature has been put forward.

LITTLEJOHNS: It changes every year.

LAMAMRA: It changes every year, yes.

LEWIS: Yes, in the '70s and '80s you were regarded as anti-Western and pro-Communist. Now, is there any legacy of that still in G-77?

LAMAMRA: I think it was wrong at the time to look at us as being pro-Communist and anti-Western. We wanted to stand by ourselves and to promote our interests as developing countries, and we were very much aware that the major partners would help us in achieving our goals as the western countries. So it happened that the Communist countries did support, from time to time, certain stands of G-77. But I can assure you that our Group has never been manipulated by anybody.

MENON: But on the concept of development, of what constitutes development, there seems to be a failure of vision, as it were, not within the Group of 77 as much as within the international secretariats, including the World Bank, the IMF, and the UN in particular. How does a group like yours contend with this fairly large problem?

LAMAMRA: I think, as I have said, we have achieved in the past a certain number of conceptual breakthroughs, and things have changed in the world, and we look forward to some new vision to be worked out before the end of this century. We think that the "Agenda for Development" that the Secretary-General will release soon would be the best opportunity for all of us, G-77 and other members of the UN, to work out such a vision.

LEWIS: Do your members subscribe to the view that the best course for development is through free markets and correct pricing?

LAMAMRA: I would think that more and more that view is widely supported within our ranks.

LEWIS: So if there is a kind of consensus on how you should go about getting development, I don't quite see the role for your organization, because everybody agrees on free markets as the basis of economic policy.

LAMAMRA: Well, you see, the international organizations are the articulators of international cooperation. Whether the free market operates nationally and internationally or not, there are certainly certain balances to be realized. And there are some major initiatives to be taken at the level of international organizations. There is a need even in a market economy -- that is why we have GATT agreement for instance -- even in market economy there is a need for regulation, and there is a need for consensus among major actors that are States.

MENON: Traditionally the Group of 77 have positioned themselves as the South vis-a-vis the North, from the industrialized countries, and, over the years, this has been a

relationship of some tension, mainly because the developing countries have perceived the North as being in a situation where they try to pursue imperialist ambitions in the South. To what extent is this still true in the situation that you face now?

LAMAMRA: I think, regardless of the analysis that could be made, both the relationship between the industrialized countries and developing countries, both Bretton Woods institutions with developing countries, today our main concern as developing countries is to achieve some kind of genuine partnership in favour of development. We stand for partnership, and to that end we do our best to get a renewal of the North-South dialogue.

LEWIS: Right. But, I mean, it seems to me that if we do have a global consensus on free markets and democracy as being the two attributes of modern society, then there is a sense in which history has ended and there isn't a role for organizations anymore.

LAMAMRA: Well, I cannot share this view for obvious reasons. We consider that, even within a market economy, there is wide room for States' intervention everywhere, in terms of regulation, in terms of balancing the benefits of economic growth, in terms of taking care of the social dimension of the economic development, because economic growth by itself is not a guarantee for prosperity, for stability in every country. That is why we believe that, in parallel with the role of government in any Member States, we think that within United Nations system there is still promising room for activities of groups like G-77.

LEWIS: But, I mean, few countries have a stronger state sector than Algeria, your country, sir. Yet if we look at Algeria today, frankly, you have got very little to show for the huge amount of oil wealth that you have wasted.

LAMAMRA: Well, I don't believe really that the Algerian income has been wasted. You can look at certain figures. We have been investing in infrastructure, in education, in various fields, most of what we are getting from oil. Even if you look at the military expenditures, you will find that the part that Algeria is investing in military expenditure is much less than what some countries having the same size do invest in military expenditures. So our national policy is in line with what we have always tried to achieve in G-77. And here I may open parentheses to mention that Algeria has given to G-77, through the Algiers Charter in 1967, a platform of action and methods of work that have invigorated the Group for a long time.

MENON: When you look at the North now, do you see uniformly friendly faces?

LAMAMRA: Oh, yes, we do have a lot of friendly faces in the North. We can disagree, we don't expect anybody to agree with us 100 per cent, and we can live with that. We see very friendly faces from traditionally friendly and helpful countries such as the Nordic countries in various fields, and we have more of them on some specific issues, and we are quite optimistic that in the spirit of the renewal of dialogue we could achieve a lot of things in the new political atmosphere.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador, we have only a few seconds left. But what is the main priority for the Group of 77 in this 30th anniversary year?

LAMAMRA: Well, first to celebrate 30 years of existence and of achievement --

LITTLEJOHNS: Despite what Paul Lewis says about lack of achievement.

LAMAMRA: Despite what my dear friend, Paul, says. Second, of course, to look, to give a fresh look at our platform of action, to renew it, to adjust it, to adapt it, and also to improve the organizational matters in terms of coordination, better coordination with the chapters. And also better input to the "Agenda for Development" and to all these major conferences that are being prepared now.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Lamamra, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Ambassador Ramtane Lamamra, Chairman of the Group of 77. He was interviewed by Paul Lewis of *The New York Times* and Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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